

# **No System but the Ecosystem: Earth First! and Anarchism**

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There is a clear case to be made for the connection between ecology and anarchism.<sup>1</sup> Many philosophers, academics, and radicals have elaborated this over the past two centuries<sup>2</sup>. But reviewing the history of this theoretical relationship is not the goal here. The movement surrounding anarchism in the past 200 years has certainly included its fair share of theory, yet what has rooted anarchist ideas so deeply in human society is the prioritization of *action*. It is this action-based relationship between the ecological movement and anarchism that we explore.

How has anarchism inspired and shaped ecological action in recent history, and how might it continue to? The experience of Earth First! over three-and-a-half decades embodies the most critical aspects of this question.

While Earth First! (EF!) has never considered itself to be explicitly anarchist, it has always had a connection to the antiauthoritarian counterculture and has operated in an anarchistic fashion since its inception<sup>3</sup>. In doing so, it has arguably maintained one of the most consistent and long-running networks for activists and revolutionaries of an anarchist persuasion with the broader goal of overturning all socially constructed hierarchies.

In *Oppose and Propose: Lessons From Movement for a New Society*, which covers an under-acknowledged antiauthoritarian history, author Andrew Cornell makes a case about MNS carrying the legacy of nonhierarchical radical activism from the civil rights and anti-war era of the '60s into the anti-nuke era of the '80s. Cornell points to MNS essentially carrying the torch just long enough to spark what would become the global justice movement of the late '90s.

A similar case can be made for Earth First!, particularly within the decade between the formal end of MNS and the 1999 uprising against the World Trade Organization in the streets of Seattle. Except rather than formally calling it quits, as MNS did in '89, EF! stuck around, stumbling through several waves of internal strife and state repression to continue into its 35th year as a decentralized, horizontally-organized, anticapitalist, antistate force to be reckoned with.<sup>4</sup>

As many anarchist-oriented projects come and go, it is worthwhile to explore how and why those efforts that persist over decades are able to do so. Even more importantly, in this time of global urgency surrounding an escalation of overlapping ecological crises (extinction, extraction, climate change, etc.), and the recuperation of environmentalism by a “green” industrial economy, the story of Earth First!—for all its imperfections and baggage—has crucial lessons for ecological revolutionaries.

When Earth First! had its first peak of notoriety in the mid-to-late '80s, it was swarmed by academics and journalists looking to study its motivations, culture and worldview. Countless research papers and several books surfaced to explore the movement from its infancy to its initial

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<sup>1</sup> The perspectives presented come from a first-hand perspective. The author has no credentials in academia. On the contrary, he doesn't have a High School diploma.

<sup>2</sup> A few familiar, albeit very Eurocentric, examples might include: Kropotkin's *Mutual Aid*; the writings of French geographer Elisee Reclus, transcendentalists like H.D. Thoreau and Romantics such as William Blake; Emma Goldman's naming of her publication *Mother Earth*; the earlier experiences of the Diggers, Luddites and other rurally-based radical movements, and more recently, the writings of Murray Bookchin who has been explicitly exploring anarchist theory and social ecology since the 1960s.

<sup>3</sup> This is the case particularly in the US, UK and Australia. Although there is a history of EF!-affiliated activity in other countries, including Japan, The Philippines, Sierra Leon, Poland, France, the Netherlands, Iceland, Italy and France, I have found much less background information in these places to make as clear a case.

<sup>4</sup> The Center for Consumer Freedom and the FBI has considered EF! a primary domestic threat for many years. As recent as Oct 2013, the US Army has released a manual listing Earth First! as terrorist threat. Source: earthfirstjournal.org

split. The split, as it has thus far been presented in the vast majority of the published history, was between the original narrowly-focused faction advocating explicitly for wilderness protection, and an opposing faction oriented towards a broader analysis focused on challenging the capitalist system along with its pillars of patriarchy, racism and other forms of domination.

While the latter faction got tagged with the label of being “the anarchists,” there are plenty of examples of anarchism being a significant inspiration to both camps. The cause of the split was a divide between folks with a strongly US-flavored individualist tendency, à la Ed Abbey,<sup>5</sup> and the more classically socialistic mass-movement-types who might best be represented by the organizing of Judi Bari.<sup>6</sup> On one side was the group rallying around the iconic identity of the “rebellious redneck,” attempting to capture rural support in a practical, populist style.<sup>7</sup> The other is often credited with a familiarity with the theoretical writings of Murray Bookchin, originator of the theory known as social ecology and its political program, libertarian municipalism.<sup>8</sup> Many of this second group came with the stigma of being “urbanites.”

The record shows the black-clad socialist-leaning end of the anarchist spectrum as victors over the cowboy-hat-and-belt-buckle rugged individualists, with a climax at the 1990 EF! Rendezvous, resulting in a burned American flag and a changing of hands for the movement’s mouthpiece, *The Earth First! Journal*. At this time the *EF! Journal* shifted hands from co-founder Dave Foreman’s control to a formal editorial collective. This ushered in a stronger sentiment of autonomy and decentralization in the minimalist structure of EF!, as there was no longer a central figure associated with its primary means of communication.

Yet there are also plenty of examples showing overlap between the two factions since day one. For example, the frequent use of the pen-name Leon Czolgosz—the anarchist assassin of US President McKinley—appeared prominently throughout *EF! Journals* in the early-to-mid ’80s, and Dave Foreman’s co-authorship of *Ecodefense* with the ghost of famed IWW organizer “Big Bill” Haywood, who was exiled from the US to Russia along with Emma Goldman in 1917.

While Foreman became a lightning rod in the debate, particularly highlighting his increasingly conservative views on immigration, his initial anarchist tendencies that inspired the founding of EF! are present in passages throughout his autobiography, *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Abbey was the author of cult classic *The Monkeywrench Gang*, a fictitious book that inspired environmentalists in the ’70s to rally around sabotage as a tactic, spurring the start of EF! While Abbey was consistently anti-authoritarian in most of his views, he also dabbled in some questionable rhetoric regarding immigrants and borders. In particular, an essay on immigration included in a collection of his work, entitled *One Life At A Time Please*, has been frequently referenced by notoriously bigoted right-wing xenophobes affiliated with the racist John Tanton network in attempt to maintain a foothold of influence and credibility in the environmental movement.

<sup>6</sup> Bari was best known for her staunch position as an IWW labor organizer who brought loggers and environmentalists together to fight the Maxxam corporation, a multinational company which was liquidating its “assets” (jobs and trees), after getting caught up in the Savings & Loans scandal. She wrote a popular booklet “Revolutionary Ecology” calling for a more thorough anti-capitalist analysis from EF! She was later injured in a car bomb that pointed to FBI involvement, and died in 1997.

<sup>7</sup> Ironically, this group was also more deeply embracing of the hippy-esque spirituality of Deep Ecology, perhaps imagining themselves capable of tapping into the religious fervor of rural Baptists.

<sup>8</sup> This clash manifested in a book, *Defending the Earth*, which was co-authored by Bookchin and EF! co-founder Dave Foreman in 1991.

<sup>9</sup> Take this example of Foreman’s thoughts on borders and bioregions: “One of the key concepts of bioregionalism is that modern political boundaries have no relationship to natural ecological provinces. Bioregionalists argue that human society—and therefore, politics and economics—should be based on natural ecosystems. They find affinity with Indian tribes and with Basque, Welsh, and Kurdish separatists, and have no sympathy with the modern nation-state, empire, or multinational corporation.” From *Confessions of an Eco-Warrior*. (Harmony Books. NYC, 1991. pp. 43)

Unfortunately, most of the well-documented and published research on EF! ends around the time of this split. Books like *Coyotes and Town Dogs* by Susan Zakin, *Green Rage* by Chris Manes, *Eco-Warriors* by Rik Scarce, and essays by academics like Giorel Curran<sup>10</sup> and Bron Taylor<sup>11</sup> all taper off in the mid '90's. Even books that were published more recently, such as *Treespiker* (2009), written by EF! co-founder Mike Roselle, lose track of the EF! movement by the early '00s.

Others have opted to ignore EF!'s role in the ecology movement completely, such as the documentary film by Mark Kitchell *A Fierce Green Fire*, released in 2013, and the 2011 book *Deep Green Resistance*, co-authored by Derrick Jensen, Lierre Keith and Aric McBay.

Kitchell's film is an excellent historical overview of the environmental movement and the influence that direct action has had on it, including features on Greenpeace, Sea Shepherd and the seldom talked about Love Canal hostage-taking incident<sup>12</sup> that sparked the modern concept of environmental justice. But the film fails to even *mention* the undeniable impact that EF! had in the trajectory of the movement.

The Jensen, *et al*, *Deep Green Resistance* (DGR) book, which inspired a parallel organizational effort, also left EF! out of their narrative. While there is much content of interest, *Deep Green Resistance* essentially presents a revisionist history of ecological struggles, painting DGR as the only radical option in the environmental movement, and further indicating the strong Maoist influences that anarchists have suspected of the organization since its inception.

For these reasons alone, an EF! movement overview from a grassroots perspective, particularly highlighting the past decade-and-a-half, is much needed.

## Thoughts on EF! Strategy and Context

EF! has often been lumped in with non-violent movements, even though "nonviolence" has never been a guiding tenet (with the exception of a very few EF! groups.)

The most often discussed example of this was in the midst of anti-logging campaigns in Northern California, where famed organizer Judi Bari made headway in bridging the interests of working class loggers and anti-corporate environmentalists by convincing EF!ers in the region to swear off tree spiking, and embrace a rhetoric of non-violence.

But the larger debate has manifested in a much more general way, most visible in the chosen tactics of EF! affinity groups. The overwhelming number of EF!-affiliated actions involve classically executed civil disobedience, where EF!ers establish blockades or occupations in which people depend on the police to react with a certain amount of restraint and caution in the process of evictions, resulting in quite predictable arrests. Often, small-scale property damage and disruptions of the *less civil* sort also occur publicly, but these tend to be peripheral to the planned actions.

This approach can seem strange for people who live in countries where engagement with the state tends to occur on much different terms. Perhaps it is this reason that organizing under the EF! banner has been seen primarily in "first world" countries.

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<sup>10</sup> Curran's 2006 book *21st Century Dissent: Anarchism, Anti-Globalization and Environmentalism* includes several chapters regarding EF! and its offshoots

<sup>11</sup> Taylor's recently wrote "Resistance: Do the Ends Justify the Means" published by Worldwatch Institute in their *State of the World 2013* book

<sup>12</sup> Two government representatives from the EPA were held hostage in New York, May 1980, by low-income homeowner who were being poisoned from the dumping of toxic chemicals. Two days later, their demands were met.

EF! affinity groups have shown that blockades can be an effective form of resistance because they take a financial toll on industrial opponents, not only in the form of forced work stoppages, but also in significant costs associated with increased security and insurance premiums and most of all, the expense of dealing with negative public relations.

There are other important aspects of this form of resistance as well. For one, it allows an opportunity to attract a broader base of public support. Even in places and times where militant revolutionary sentiment is not present, EF!'s style of resistance allows space for a larger spectrum of allies, particularly from impacted local communities and mainstream environmentalists who are receptive to the need for direct action. In many cases, these groups may lack the courage, skills or privileges that allow for effective action, but will contribute towards campaigns in many other ways: food, supplies, monetary assistance, and so on.

And perhaps most importantly, the civil disobedience style of action that EF! is most known for allows deeper relationships of affinity to form through shared experiences of public confrontation. Time and again, we have heard stories of these relationships in the streets or the backwoods giving birth to stronger affinity groups capable of greater organized attacks that do not rely on civility and expectations of arrest, as in the case of the Earth Liberation Front (ELF), which grew almost simultaneously in the 1990s from the anti-roads occupations in the UK and anti-logging blockades in the US.

Ironically, another example of the issues surrounding nonviolence rhetoric can be seen in the guidelines adopted by the organized factions of the ELF.

The connections between EF! and the ELF are quite clear. Though the organizing of each occurred independently, we still see much crossover in culture and attitude, including strategy, tactics and philosophy. Yet while the ELF presents a more militant approach, they also take the rhetoric of nonviolence more seriously than EF! has, articulating a definition of violence (essentially, *direct impacts to living beings*) and a position against engaging in it. All printed materials produced by ELF cells, their support groups and their press offices stress not intentionally harming living things. This language did not come from EF!, but from the animal liberation movement, specifically the Animal Liberation Front (ALF).

It's at this juncture where we can see another significant cross-pollination between the modern anarchist movement and EF!

## Earth First! and Animal Liberation

Since the earliest days of EF!, there have been both staunch vegans and committed hunters involved. But there has been sufficient commonality, and a shared rejection of anthropocentrism, to avoid much conflict. As a result, the nuances and contradictions—such as prioritization of sentient animals over the integrity of whole ecosystems<sup>13</sup> — have gone unexplored, perhaps in an attempt not to upset the tenuous dynamic.

But there are some noteworthy challenges over the last couple of decades. As Judi Bari's anti-capitalist analysis increased EF!'s appeal to crowds of college students and anarcho-punks, the prominence of animal liberation activists co-mingling with EF!ers increased.

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<sup>13</sup> The most glaring example: are the lives and freedom of mink caged for fur worth the immediate risk posed to the populations of songbirds and other small prey by large, sudden releases of predators into an area?

And just as Bari herself didn't fit the label of the urban-dwelling-university-Marxist, neither did some of the anarchists who brought animal liberation into EF! circles. The most prominent of these was Rod Coronado, a Native American of the Pascua Yaqui Nation, who participated in EF! gatherings during the '80s and gained notoriety for acts of sabotage that sunk half the Icelandic whalers fleet costing them \$2 million, in addition to an arson at Michigan State University which caused \$125,000 worth of damage and destroyed 32 years of fur industry research as part of the ALF's "Operation Bite Back."

Coronado's roots in the animal liberation movement are illustrative of the movement itself. Coronado got started by sabotaging trophy hunters with other anarchists while visiting the UK. Similar hunt sabotages in the '70s are how the ALF began. His specific involvement in these actions make up a large part of the initial cross-pollination between anarchism, animal liberation and Earth First!

Through the '90s and '00s, these overlapping movements became a prominent force in direct action struggles. In the US, the FBI identified each of them as constituting significant "terrorist" threats, though none had actually caused bodily harm, only economic damage.

While the ambitious direct action culture surrounding the ALF can be credited with lending inspiration and courage to radical environmentalism, and EF! specifically, valuable questions should also be asked about this relationship. Such as:

*Does the philosophy of animal liberation contradict biocentrism by prioritizing sentient animals over plants, mountains, rivers, etc.?*

*Does this philosophy create limitations on EF!'s long-term biocentric goals by encouraging rigid guidelines on violence and sentience?*

*Does it lessen EF!'s connection to land-based communities by dismissing the interests of animal farmers and hunters that are often at the forefront of threats from industrial expansion?*

These are subjects with plenty of gray areas. Yet, these topics have also been increasingly divisive among those engaged in eco-resistance. The divisions have been fueled in large part by DGR co-author Lierre Keith's other book, *The Vegetarian Myth*. Unfortunately Keith's authoritarian attitude and anti-transgender position have stifled what could have been a much more productive discussion resulting from her book.

Yet it is possible to explore disagreements between animal liberation philosophy and EF!'s biocentrism, while continuing to deepen commitments to fighting together on common goals.

## **A Review of Insurrectionist Tendencies in Earth First!**

The rise of insurrectionary anarchism has been one of the most frequent crossovers between EF! and the anarchist movement over the past decade.

At the 2013 Earth First! Rendezvous in North Carolina, a small pamphlet addressed to Earth First! was circulated under the title "The Issues Are Not the Issue: A letter to Earth First! from a Too-Distant Friend," credited to the pseudonym ST (an author affiliated with CrimethInc.) A discussion group accompanied the pamphlet on the topics addressed by the writer, who acknowledged that "none of this [was] particularly new," hearkening back primarily to the essay "Earth First! Means Social War," a popular but rambling piece of prose published by the *EF! Journal*

in 2007<sup>14</sup>. The “Issues” essay can be summed up as: EF! spends too much effort on organized campaigns and not enough on fomenting general revolt.

While there is merit to this idea, the critical tone is played out. At its worst, it’s dangerous to those aiming to sustain an ecological resistance—not *dangerous* as in *exciting* (as are many of CrimethInc.’s rants<sup>15</sup>) but dangerous as in potentially dragging EF! back through the mud, which played a negative role in periods of stagnation and repression, and worse, paved the way for blunders like the development of the cult of DGR.

The sentiment in “Issues” actually predates the “EF! Means Social War” article by seven or eight years. ST makes a vague reference to similar critiques that surfaced earlier in British EF! circles. These references point to another essay, called “Give Up Activism,” which circulated as a pamphlet, and was later published, ironically, in the *Earth First! Journal*.

In the following years, the influence of *Green Anarchy* (GA), both as an ideology and a publication, also coming to the US via the UK, began reshaping Earth First! The GA movement and its magazine contributed significantly to developing the theory that surrounded EF!’s basic tenets. But it also included GA folks attending EF! gatherings to convince other participants to abandon activism and organizing, which people affiliated with Green Anarchy view as perpetuated by a civilized mindset.<sup>16</sup>

Green Anarchy attempted to narrow the definition of direct action to militant acts of sabotage, either carried out by underground groups or by mobs, opposing any efforts at publicly organized resistance, calling it “Leftist.” While many insurrectionary anarchists might balk at a claim that they are influenced by GA, they would be hard-pressed to deny its influence.

“Issues,” “Social War,” and *Green Anarchy* were all also predated by another similar trend and its accompanying publication, *Live Wild Or Die* (LWOD). Like the others, it was militant, anarchist, anti-Left, and anti-civilization. It was also well-circulated at EF! gatherings. Rumor has it that it may have actually been edited and produced by anonymous collective members of the *EF! Journal*. Unlike the others, it wasn’t trying to coax people away from organized campaigns, sustained road blockades, and Earth First!’s unique activist culture in general, but rather hoped to accentuate these.

In the years following the circulation of *LWOD*, when EF! was at its peak, the Earth Liberation Front flared up across the US—often in tandem with public ecodefense campaigns. Much of the anti-globalization movement that gridlocked urban streets during the trade summits of this time also descended from regional EF! campaigns. Not to mention Ted Kaczynski, dubbed the Unabomber by the government for his targeting of university professors involved in questionable technological research, made use of *LWOD*’s published target list, as well as drawing inspiration from articles in the *EF! Journal*.

In comparison, a couple years into the publication of *Green Anarchy* magazine, the ecological movement experienced a lull accompanied by the most severe repression it had experienced. Unfortunately, folks had created a movement that was learning how to skin roadkill, dream of insurrection, and cheer for indigenous uprisings in faraway lands, but was too ideologically iso-

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<sup>14</sup> The author of “EF! Means Social War” went on to publish *Politics is Not A Banana* in 2009, making the EF! Social War piece seem dry and textbook-like.

<sup>15</sup> The CrimethInc. magazine *Rolling Thunder*, for example, calls itself “a journal of dangerous living.”

<sup>16</sup> This occurred most notably during the EF! Round River Rendezvous of 2005, in the Mount Hood area of Oregon, ironically the same time and location where the FBI began Operation Backfire, later known as a starting point of the Green Scare (see below), by sending a wired informant to secure evidence against ELF participants.



lated and marginal to effectively withstand the wave of FBI repression that hit among key players in the rising ecological resistance efforts of the mid-2000s.

The median age range of participants in EF! dropped by nearly a decade in those years. By the 2007 Round River Rendezvous (EF!'s annual summer gathering in the US), also the year "EF! Means Social War" was published, there was hardly a person over thirty in attendance. The following year, at the Rendezvous in Indiana, there was a well-attended discussion led by young anarchists out of the insurrectionist milieu on whether or not EF! should continue to exist at all. Earth First! endured two hard blows over the last ten years: many newer activists became convinced it wasn't as cool as it had been in the '90s; and many older activists became convinced that affiliation with it wasn't worth the surveillance and repression.

As a result, with the exception of a few groups and campaigns across the US and UK, very few were using the Earth First! banner. In its place, myriad groups became more prominent, further fragmenting what was left of EF!. Examples include Cascadia Forest Defenders and Mountain Justice in the early 2000s; Root Force and Rising Tide in the mid-2000s; and Tar Sands Blockade and Appalachia Resist! in the last few years.

While most of the local or issue-specific manifestations that spiraled out of EF! were tamer and media-friendly, most noteworthy Rising Tide, an opposite effect also occurred. A glimpse of this could be seen in the short-lived Root Force project. Root Force, birthed through the *EF! Journal* in 2006, sought a more targeted movement strategy focusing on stopping the expansion of key global infrastructure projects. The project was modeled on Stop Huntingdon Animal Cruelty (SHAC), an animal liberation campaign targeting companies affiliated with vivisection giant Huntingdon Life Science (HLS), which successfully applied pressure via direct action to sever contracts that supported the operation of HLS.

Inspired largely by Derrick Jensen's *Endgame* books, Root Force's ambitious, militant rhetoric resulted in a semi-vanguardist organizing approach that soon faded into a scaled back effort, and eventually became just a website offering anti-infrastructure news, strategy and analysis.

## Enter Deep Green Resistance

While tension between EF! and Deep Green Resistance (DGR) has primarily concerned criticism of DGR's rigid structure, represented most clearly by a mandated rejection of transgender people,<sup>17</sup> there is something deeper.

In several ways, EF!ers participated in allowing DGR to develop, some even subtly nurturing it in hopes that it might be able to fill the niche that was left by what appeared to be EF!'s fading, perhaps pushing the no-compromise envelope even further than EF! had been able to.<sup>18</sup>

But that's no longer the case—EF! no longer appears on its way out, and DGR does not appear to be growing, at least not outside of *Facebook*. Still, seeing the success that DGR enjoyed momentarily leaves one guarded of critiques like the ones in "Issues."<sup>19</sup> Not because EF! is too

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<sup>17</sup> "[M]y group and the other [DGR] chapters were presented with a choice: put up with trans phobia or hit the road." Source: [www.decolonizingyoga.com](http://www.decolonizingyoga.com)

<sup>18</sup> For example, the *EF! Journal* published a section of the DGR book in its pages in 2012, and EF! organizers of the 2012 Winter Rendezvous in Utah invited discussions from DGR organizers.

<sup>19</sup> During the writing of this essay, a new publication inspired by GA, entitled *Blackseed*, released a first edition featuring an all-too-familiar slam of EF!, this time focusing on a hollow position that EF! is allegedly fortifying the rhetoric of nonviolence to pacify ecological resistance.

thin-skinned to be criticized, but because the organizing that appears in the vacuums that we leave is, at least in part, on us.

## **A Voice for the Underground and for Caged Warriors**

One of the things that sets EF! apart from other eco-groups is the consistent vocal support for incidents of ecological armed struggle around the world, including the US.

While most environmental groups have generally shied away from militant actions, dismissed them—or worse, falsely accusing them of being done by state provocateurs—EF! has consistently stood up for militant underground groups' actions, celebrating their attacks and publishing their communiqués.

Since the inception of the Earth Liberation Front, which appeared in the early '90s, first in the UK, then in the US, it has always had ties to EF!. Essentially, EF! operated as an aboveground support network and mouthpiece for ELF actions. The same can be said to an extent for the ALF, though it was initiated in the late '70s, prior to the existence of EF!, and has always maintained a larger base of support among the mainstream animal rights movement.

In the wake of the Green Scare—a phrase used to describe a series of events in which both underground and aboveground Earth and animal liberation activists were arrested and accused of terrorism—the stories of individuals from active cells of the ELF have become public knowledge. The relationship between the ELF and EF! was exposed by these cases to be very strong, with direct connections between people who were involved simultaneously in major EF! blockades, the *EF! Journal* and some of the most notorious instances of ELF sabotage.

One take on this situation is that this relationship was too close, and that people involved in underground actions should have avoided the aboveground movement entirely. But a more realistic assessment of the Green Scare is that while many major ELF actions seemed to be undertaken by superheroes of fictional proportions, they were actually carried out by small groups of normal people, just like anyone else. In many cases, they may have once stood next to us at a campfire or protest.

We now know that many of those indicted for ELF crimes knew each other from their participation in aboveground direct action campaigns or participation on the *Earth First! Journal* collective, where they built enough trust and respect for each other to undertake attacks that caused over a hundred million dollars in damages to corporate and government targets in over 1,000 reported actions in the US alone.

The largest of known ELF cells, what the media referred to as “The Family,” operated with more than a dozen active members, torching a lumber company headquarters, a US Forest Service office, genetic engineering test sites, a ski resort and a slaughterhouse, among others. Members of the cell were only arrested after it had disbanded and one of the members with a heroine addiction, Jake Ferguson, became a government informant.

Despite the wave of indictments, grand juries, new laws aimed at Earth and animal activists, and accusations of terrorism, the ELF continue their strikes to this day, claiming recent actions in the US and in several other countries, including Russia, Mexico, Indonesia, England and Germany.

In communiqués from ELF cells in these other countries, it has not been uncommon in the last few years that an action will be claimed by both the ELF and another explicitly anarchist group,

most commonly an ad-hoc faction of the Federation of Informal Anarchists (or FAI in the Italian acronym).

There are countless peasant and indigenous groups who choose the path of armed self-defense and rebellion around the world that get direct support from people involved with EF! or coverage in the pages of the *EF! Journal* and Newswire. Even considering strategic and ideological differences, EF! continually offers these groups a public voice to amplify the feelings of urgency and anger that their actions express, particularly in the moments when members of these groups have been captured by the state.

## Eco-Prisoner Support

While prisoner support has been a long-standing tradition of anarchists worldwide, EF! is one of the few environmental groups to acknowledge the existence of ecological political prisoners. It has been a source of support for many ecologically oriented prisoners over the past 30 years by publishing addresses and stories to encourage correspondence and circulating the *EF! Journal* to prisoners around the world.

In the past decade, the numbers of these prisoners has spiked, resulting from the increase of state resources and policies directed at labeling ecological saboteurs as terrorists. This is done partly at the behest of industrial corporations profiting from creating ecological crisis, as we have seen in the agenda of the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC).<sup>20</sup>

This repression is not only targeting underground activists. For example, ALEC is responsible for creating and lobbying for laws to generalize the criminalization of dissent, such as the Animal Enterprise Terrorism Act (AETA21) which sent six members of the SHAC group to prison on charges related to their aboveground organizing.

While this sentiment is very strong in the US, we are seeing it spread to other countries as well, such as in the *Il Silvestre* cases of Swiss and Italian eco-anarchists accused with the legal language of terrorism for planning to attack a nanotech laboratory owned by IBM. The trend has also spread to Latin America, where environmentalists are working with indigenous groups to resist industrialization.

The practice of political prisoner support has also seen friction between Earth First! and anarchists on several occasions. In one example, the long-standing Anarchist Black Cross (ABC) Federation was hesitant to accept eco and animal prisoners onto their national listing of prisoners to support, starting with the imprisonment of Rod Coronado in the mid-90s. When the Green Scare hit in 2005, this tension resurfaced and ultimately, the culture of the ABC network shifted, with many supporters of eco-prisoners taking active roles in the organization.

## Eco-Liberation Against Oppression

While EF! gained a reputation in the '80s as beer-swilling macho guys, in part rightly so, there is certainly more to the story. The women involved at that time also speak of a powerful feminist

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<sup>20</sup> ALEC is an alliance of politicians and businesses formed to lobby the government for right wing and capitalist interests.

presence.<sup>21</sup> And there is ample evidence that expressing active solidarity with indigenous and land-based communities has been a priority for many EF!ers since day one.<sup>22</sup>

Still, along with much of the early environmental conservation movement, EF! came out of largely white, middle-class, single-issue oriented activism. That's left a lot of baggage to unpack. EF! has had rocky moments in its history, namely with xenophobia and racist misanthropic ranting about population control.

Today, the movement's most prominent organizers have worked to confront that history as well as more recent manifestations of similar attitudes, and worked to strengthen EF!'s affinity with marginalized communities and individuals with whom they share basic values.

In the past decade, groups like Trans' and Women's Action Camp (TWAC) and Rising Tide, both beginning as offshoots of EF!, continue to have much crossover with the organization. These groups represent an important piece of EF!'s recent history, and they also point to the likely future of EF! and the broader ecological resistance movement.

TWAC formed as a pro-feminist, queer-and-trans-positive space outside of the patriarchy and gender norms that often surfaced at EF! gatherings and actions. Beginning in 2004, TWAC was initially an "all womyn's"<sup>23</sup> affinity groups and action camp" established in forest defense campaigns in the Pacific Northwest. In the following years, the name TWAC appeared and spread from the Pacific Northwest to Florida, with TWAC-oriented affinity groups also appearing at all recent EF! gatherings.

Along with providing more inclusive spaces for discussion and action trainings, TWAC actions can also be credited with pushing back the boundaries of conventional activist media strategy, coordinating actions that use the language of anti-oppression prominently. In a way, this has succeeded in demystifying public discourse around liberatory language.

Rising Tide also surfaced in the mid 2000s, first in the UK, then in the US. The US group, which started as the Earth First! Climate Caucus in 2006, soon became Rising Tide North America (RTNA), including contacts in Mexico and Canada. The group focuses primarily on supporting environmental justice struggles of communities on the front lines of issues related to climate change and carbon extraction, with a secondary focus on exposing false solutions to climate change, in particular the market-based approach of making carbon offsets into a capitalist commodity.

Some initial concerns were raised regarding Rising Tide drawing people and energy from EF!. While that did happen to a certain extent, there have also been benefits, including increased movement building and organizing experience with frontline communities. Rising Tide reaches people that EF! has historically had less successful relations with—namely the environmental justice movement, led by people of color and low-income folks. Today, there may be more people from EF! organizing as Rising Tide than EF!

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<sup>21</sup> Karen Pickett and Karen Coulter, both prominent organizers involved with EF! since the early '80s, often speak to this at EF! gatherings.

<sup>22</sup> The first EF! action on record involved erecting a monument to Apache warriors who raided a mining camp. In 1980 Earth First! erected a monument dedicated to Victorio for his successful raid on Cooney and the killing of Cooney and his men. It read, in part, "*This monument celebrates the 100th anniversary of the great Apache chief Victorio's raid on the Cooney mining camp near Mogollon, New Mexico, on April 12, 1880. Victorio strove to protect these mountains from mining and other destructive activities of the white race. The present Gila Wilderness is partly a fruit of his efforts...*"

<sup>23</sup> The spelling "women" was initially used by the organizers in this group, though most TWAC organizers have opted to drop the "y" spelling, as it has come to be associated with anti-trans sentiments of a second wave feminist trend.

## Disappointment with DGR

When Deep Green Resistance (DGR) came on the scene, it was not uncommon to hear EF!ers expressing high hopes that they would bring new energy and strategic thinking ... and boy was that *a let down!*

The people at the top of DGR consistently disrespect potential allies in transgender, anarchist<sup>24</sup> and animal rights circles, then preach *ad naseum* against “horizontal hostility” (meaning the denigration of other activists’ efforts) whenever they were challenged.

In 2013, the *EF! Journal* Collective adopted a position explicitly taking issue with the persistent anti-transgender attitude of Keith and Jensen, and the policies they enforce for DGR, using their influence as renowned authors. DGR’s position against trans people stems from adherence to a theoretical trend of second wave feminism. This view thinks that if gender is a social construct designed to repress women, any expression of gender is therefore an affront to women. While EF! has long held a critique of patriarchy, seeing it as having cleared a path for industrialism, it takes more than the absence or presence of a penis to maintain patriarchy. The controlling and dominating behavior exemplified by DGR’s authority figures is a far greater concern than the fabricated threat of transgender people against a particular sect of feminism.

Thankfully the debate surrounding DGR has presented another opportunity for today’s anarchist and ecological resistance movements to clarify and strengthen its position of solidarity with trans people. Making strides towards the queering of activist counter culture has become a priority for many EF! organizers.

Despite the disappointment with DGR, the primary reason that people were drawn to it—a desire for deeper strategic thinking— remains largely unsatisfied. Sadly, DGR has lost all the credibility it may have had. Even Aric McBay, the primary author of the strategy sections in the book upon which the movement is based, parted ways with the organization, citing frustration with the group’s anti-transgender policy.<sup>25</sup>

## An Image from the Future of Ecological Resistance

Around the world, both ecological consciousness and rebellion against the state are becoming more the norm. In the last year, uprisings in Turkey, Brazil, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Ferguson<sup>26</sup> (to name but a few) have at times dominated news’ headlines. Two years prior, capitol squares were occupied in Spain and Greece, riots occurred in England, and First Nations’ blockades erupted across Canada. Even glimmers of revolt in the belly of the US Empire, with the Occupy encampment on Wall Street, an attempt at a general strike to shut down Oakland’s ports, and over 400 Occupy-related direct action camps in public spaces across the country. And shortly before that, of course, was the Arab Spring.

This news was often side-by-side with stories of the rise of the global hydraulic fracking industry; the nightmare of expanding and exporting tar sands oil; the boom in pipeline construction

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<sup>24</sup> Jensen: “The Black Bloc spends more time attempting to destroy movements than they do attacking those in power...” “The anarchists are liars. It’s what anarchists do.” Sources: [www.truthdig.com](http://www.truthdig.com) [vancouver.mediacoop.ca](http://vancouver.mediacoop.ca)

<sup>25</sup> McBay: “I find these transphobic attitudes to be disgusting and deeply troubling”. Source: [en.wikipedia.org](http://en.wikipedia.org).

<sup>26</sup> As this article goes to print, the US is experiencing a nationwide response to multiple racist police killings, including riots and road blockades in many states simultaneously, going on for several months sparked by the uprising in Ferguson, MO.

and subsequent spills or explosions; poisoned water from mining disasters; outrage against Monsanto's biotech mega-farms; failure after failure in UN and other international bodies' attempts at addressing the crises surrounding climate change, etc.

The relations between these uprisings and these harsh ecological realities have been peripheral at best (except for Turkey, where the rebellion was spurred from the clearing of trees in a public park). But the potential for drawing out these connections is staring us in the face. The vast majority of Earth First! campaigns stem from a microcosm of the same power dynamics that tend to spark rebellions around the world: greed, corruption, land and power grabs, resource control, and brutal repression that often fan the flames of resistance.

Earth First!, with all its affiliates and offshoots, clearly has a contribution to make in that discussion, but there are other places outside of EF! worth a look as well, especially regarding the relationships between mass movements and affinity groups, and more specifically, aboveground and underground participants.

The following is only a brief glimpse of some recent campaigns and social struggles that deserve the attention of movement strategists.

**Anti-Gold Mining Resistance in Greece** Over the last 10 years, opposition to the construction and expansion of gold mining operations in northern Greece has shown instructive examples of community-led militancy. Villages in the mining region, in particular Skouries, have led the struggle with a series of road blockades, conflicts with the police and large-scale acts of sabotage. Part of the recent history of the anarchist movement's relations to anti-gold mining struggles goes back to an underground action in the late 1990s by Nikos Maziotis, a well-known figure today who was arrested in 2011 in connection to the armed anarchist group *Epanastatikos Agonas*.<sup>29</sup> Along with underground support, the effort to stop the gold mines has generated widespread support, connecting itself with the mass movement opposing the greed and corruption associated with social cuts and austerity measures being pushed by the European Union.

**The ZADists of France** Out of a decades-long effort by local farmers to stop an airport from clearing around 4000 acres of farms and forests, an anarchist-led occupation of the land turned into an inspiring model of ecological resistance. ZAD, a play on the airport project's acronym, was a village-scale squat. After a series of eviction attempts in 2012 – 2013, where farmers would arrive at the protest camp using their tractors to prevent excavators from destroying the squatter camps, the project was delayed. The spirit of the ZAD has since been revived in an occupation of a site slated for dam construction. The most recent occurrence at this site was the murder of a ZADist during a confrontation with police attempting an eviction, which sparked an international outpouring of solidarity actions.

**Defending Land from Coal Mining in Germany and Scotland** Once again, a long-term community-led struggle gives way to anarchist land defense camp offering a glimpse of the potential for militant ecology. In two recent cases, the Hambach forest occupation in Germany and the Mainhill camp in Scotland, anarchist and environmental organizers showed an ability to embrace a wide range of tactics in resisting coal, an issue which has become a worldwide hot button over the past decade due to the climate crisis. In the case of Mainhill, a compiled list of action between 2009 – 2010 includes a dozen acts of sabotage intermixed with roadblocks, home demos and community organizing. The Hambach campaign, which is fighting the largest coal mining operation in Europe, has seen a similar range of tactics.

**Fifteen Years of Resistance to Shell in Ireland** Before pipeline resistance became all the rage in North America, the folks from the Rosspoint area of County Mayo, Ireland, were setting

the stage. A mix of community activists who trace their roots to anti-colonial Irish struggle and young anarchist climate justice organizers combined to inspire on ongoing opposition to pipeline and refinery construction which has been able to embrace acts of sabotage in broad-daylight against surveying and construction materials, amidst months of ongoing daily road blockades, all the while expressing solidarity with Shell's worldwide opposition, namely those resisting the oil and gas industry in the Niger Delta.

**Anti-Road Forest Defense: Khimikhi in Russia** Amazing accounts of a forest defense in 2010 against a road between Moscow and St. Petersburg boasted of blockades, tree spiking and arson to construction equipment, where anti-fascist groups got involved to confront the fascist thugs brought in to support the development company's security. The resistance seemed to climax at a solidarity protest in which masked anarchists trashed the local city hall building—in the middle of the day—where the construction was approved.

**Anti-Pipeline Fights in Canada** The last several decades of collaboration and crossover between anarchists, ecologists and Indigenous communities in the occupied territory of Canada has offered inspirational guidance to the direction of a revolutionary, militant, non-authoritarian environmental movement. While there has been many examples to cite, especially amidst the anti-2010 Winter Olympics campaign and the 2012 explosion of Idle No More organizing, a specific case which stands out is the fracking resistance in Elsipogtog, where Mi'kmaq warriors from the First Nations in what is known as New Brunswick fought against plans with a full spectrum of tactics, including the confiscation and arson of company equipment, along with barricades where cops cars were set on fire during a stand-off in 2013.

There are many more examples as well, all around the world,<sup>27</sup> of underground actions effectively running concurrent with aboveground movements—some with explicit ecological aims, others with general anti-system rage. Most of these actions go underneath the radar of people not reading the dozens of communiqués posted online at international anarchist and insurrectionary sites like *ContraInfo* or *325.NoState*. (Worth noting is that for every person arrested in relation to underground activity, actions multiply in their honor.)

While few, if any, of these groups embrace a strict policy relating to the use of violence, their actions tend to target property, not people.

The skills, experience and culture of groups such as EF!, who straddle the line of aboveground and underground action, can play a significant part in creating contexts where things like anti-industrial blockades and office occupations occur in tandem with generalized uprisings, providing inspiration and social space for militant attacks and strategic sabotage to also take place.

It's not exactly a new formula for subverting society. And contrary to common sentiment among cynical US anarchists, it's not something that only happens outside the US. That is illustrated by a 2013 document leaked by the FBI, Joint Terrorism Task Force (JTTF) and Pennsylvania State Police.<sup>28</sup> In the document, a presentation intended to profile groups seen as threats to fracking companies, the JTTF creates a timeline of regional opposition to fracking in which several EF! blockades and tree sits are interspersed with a drive-by shooting and multiple alleged attempts at incendiary device attacks on fracking sites, between July 2012 and May 2013.

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<sup>27</sup> Mexico, China and Indonesia all come to mind as places where recent militant environmental movements, indigenous struggles and anarchist groups (above and under ground) have been able to open space for what may be the future of environmentalism and anti-capitalism.

<sup>28</sup> Source: [earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2014/02/15/leaked-pennsylvania-jtff-presentation-profiles-earth-first/](http://earthfirstjournal.org/newswire/2014/02/15/leaked-pennsylvania-jtff-presentation-profiles-earth-first/)

The future of ecological resistance is not something that needs an elaborate blueprint, rigid structure or dizzying intellectual dogma. It's not some fantastical super hero comic book or bad movie plot (where you have to share a communal meal in straightjackets with the mates in your clandestine cell to prepare for *the jam*, as depicted in the film *The East*<sup>29</sup>).

In short, we need to continue doing much of what we've been doing. We have the basic elements for fomenting ecological rebellion. It's the scale of our opposition that is lacking. As we've been seeing in recent uprisings around the world that can all change very quickly. With this in mind, the following questions are offered to those desiring to take steps toward heightened ecological, anti-authoritarian struggle.

*How do we amplify ourselves further? How do we make our actions more easily replicated?*

*And perhaps most importantly, how to we personally move our relationships from acquaintances at a protest to co-conspirators in ecological resistance?*

These are questions that anarchists have grappled with over the course of the past 150 years in the movement's modern history—a history that essentially paralleled the rise of industrialism. Viewed in that context, the ambitions of Earth First! can easily be seen as a continuation of anarchist ambitions, as there is little doubt that the coming generation of struggle for a free society will need to be more deeply rooted in ecology.

*Panagioti has been an EF! organizer and on the EF! Journal's Editorial Collective since 2010, though he is currently taking a hiatus. He has been a part of both Earth First! and anarchist movements in the US since the mid '90s. He grew up in a Greek-American immigrant family and currently lives in the Everglades bioregion of sub-tropical south Florida. He's never attended university and believes credibility in presenting an analysis of a movement should come primarily from lived experience rather than deskbound study.*

*Details about EF! gatherings, contact info for local groups, updates from actions, and general news/analysis can be found at: [earthfirstjournal.org](http://earthfirstjournal.org)*

Posted by *Perspectives on Anarchist Theory* ([anarchiststudies.org/perspectives/](http://anarchiststudies.org/perspectives/)) on the Institute for Anarchist Studies website ([anarchiststudies.org](http://anarchiststudies.org)).

## Notes

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<sup>29</sup> Yes. This scenario really happens in the terrible 2013 eco-terror thriller film *The East*. And yes, they call their actions "jams."



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